

A Musician's Musician

Michael Arons

There isn't much that Michael Arons hasn't done in the music industry: He has composed music for movies and television. He has recorded and performed with musicians including Elton John, Patti LaBelle, Placido Domingo, and Paul McCartney, and on soundtracks for several Broadway musicals. He has played guitar on Broadway shows ranging from the operas *Evita* and *American Idiot* to *Godspell* and, for the past four years, *Kinky Boots*. He now divides his time between playing on Broadway and hiring musicians to play on shows and tours, for which his credits include *Hamilton: An American Musical*, *Dear Evan Hansen*, *The Color Purple*, *School of Rock*, and the upcoming musicals *War Paint* and *Anastasia*.



Genesis of a guitarist

My earliest memory of being interested in music is of trying to play some of the music in the piano bench when I was about five years old. I took piano lessons and got good enough that it became a passion. Then when I was nine or ten, my brother started listening to heavy metal. I wanted to play it, but there isn't really any piano in heavy metal. The guitar became attractive to me not only because of that, but also because the Beatles played guitars. My mother was a Beatles fan and had a lot of records—and she also had an acoustic guitar that I started to play.

For the love of jazz

I went to a typical public high school in Northern Virginia until I was 15, when my mom passed away. My brother and

I went to live with my father in Washington, DC. Instead of enrolling in a regular public school, I auditioned and got in to the Duke Ellington School of the Arts. I became totally immersed in the study of jazz.

After Duke Ellington, I decided to go to Manhattan School of Music so I could study with the jazz guitarist Rodney Jones. I really wanted to play like him, and I also wanted to be in New York.

Going pro

After college, I worked as an administrative assistant at a PR firm and part-time at Rudy's Music Shop. My first big gig as a guitarist was playing in Liza Minnelli's backing band. I had started working with the record producer David Gest when Rodney Jones recommended me for a gig he couldn't do. When David started working with Liza, he hired me as part of her new rhythm section.

The bass player he hired was also playing bass on *The Lion King* on Broadway at the time. I remember asking him how he was able to do that when he was playing these other gigs, and he told me that Broadway musicians hire subs. He introduced me to the guitar player on *The Lion King*, who hired me to sub, eventually three or four times a week, for about a year and a half. For the first time, I was steadily making money as a musician.

On the list

My other entry point to Broadway was through another musical connection: Tom Kitt. I played guitar in his band, the Tom Kitt Band, in the '90s. Tom and his writing partner, Brian Yorkey, were working on theater projects, but Tom wasn't really doing anything on Broadway at the time. None of us were. We were just a rock band that played rock gigs.

When the gigs petered out, we stayed in touch. When Tom started writing musicals and was trying to get them produced, he used us as the rhythm section for readings and workshops. Tom started getting noticed when he wrote the musical *High Fidelity*, and that's when he introduced me to the music coordinator Michael Keller. He hired me for *High Fidelity*, and after that, I was on a list of sorts.

Stepping up

Michael has been doing this for 25-plus years and is one of the top two or three music coordinators in the city. He is the coordinator for *The Lion King*, *Wicked*, *Book of Mormon*, *Kinky Boots*—all the big shows. He hired me several times as a guitarist, and we got to know each other pretty well over the years.

When I was playing on *Memphis*, I asked Michael if I could be the in-house contractor, which is a person in the band who also does the payrolls, takes attendance, and deals with any issues onsite. It's a union position, and there's a pay bump for it. He said yes. There's a learning curve to it, but once you do it, you're trusted to do it again.

From hired to hiring

When Michael called me to play guitar for *Kinky Boots* four years ago, I was the in-house contractor for the seventh or eighth time. He had been talking about retiring and winding down, but it's not a business you can just stop because there are a lot of ongoing accounts. He asked me about being an assistant, to handle a lot of the paperwork and phone calls. After a couple of months of figuring out a way to make it work, we decided that we would be equal partners. Now everyone knows us as a team.

Shifting the balance

I'm still playing on *Kinky Boots*, but only five or six shows a week. I have some other shows opening up, and I have to be there as a coordinator. In the first week that an orchestra rehearses, I'm there the whole week. I'm seating the band and doing sound checks in the theater, and all of that gets in the way of my performance schedule.

I've stepped away a little as a player, and that's been tough for me. I'm not ever going to stop playing, but I may not be able to do eight shows a week.

On the other side

I get a lot of emails from new musicians who want to know how to get involved. I always try to remember what it's like to be on the other side of that. Back when I was trying to get noticed, I made a lot of cold calls. Once I started subbing in

The Lion King, I would call other guitarists to let them know I was available to sub. I would call other music directors to ask them to consider me for shows they had coming in.

I try to respond to everybody. Sometimes I pass names along to other contractors who need players to go on the road in a month for a tour or something. People who live in New York and play on Broadway probably won't do that, but there are lots of other people who live somewhere else, who are maybe right out of school, or who are just looking to get on to a show. You can't forget about those people.

There is no rule book for getting work. Playing, getting heard, having recommendations from other people—those are the most important things. Good playing speaks for itself. Sometimes I hear from other people, "Wow, did you hear so-and-so? She sounds great on that show," or "He can really play and he doubles on this other instrument." That's what a contractor wants to hear.

Open minds open doors

If you want to make a career in music, you have to be open-minded. When I was younger, I was confident that I was just going to play jazz—one genre and one style. I remember being pretty frustrated in my 20s when I was struggling to get gigs. I told myself that if I wasn't playing guitar for a living by the time I was 30, I'd do something else. But I was open-minded about it: Playing guitar for a living could mean teaching, playing jazz or rock, or, as it turned out, playing on Broadway.

And you can't be a one-trick pony. If you're a clarinet player, you should get double reeds under your belt, too. If you're an electric bass player, you also need to play upright bass. Or if you're a drummer who also plays a little piano, get your piano chops or learn mallets.

I know how it is to play an instrument and to be passionate about a style and genre. But you have to be passionate about the whole scope of the instrument, across styles and genres, and the possibilities of other instruments in the same family. That is how you'll broaden your horizons—and how you'll get noticed. ■

Learn more about Michael Aarons and his diverse musical roles at michaelaarons.com.